The Janissaries

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Comparative Slavery
Beginning in the 14th Century, the Ottoman Empire began employing slave\(^1\)-soldiers called Janissaries\(^2\) in its armies. The way the Janissaries were recruited, trained, and socialized into their roles as warrior-servants and their relationship with the Ottoman sultan, their master, qualify the system in its mature form as one of enslavement. Over the course of time, however, changes to the system accumulated until it lost the qualities of a slave institution and the Janissaries were slaves in name only. This is attested to by their intimidation and even murder of later Sultans, upsetting the idea of the master’s dominance over his slaves. The Janissaries finally met their end at the wiles of a sultan in the 19th Century, but it was an exercise of the force of arms rather than that of a master over his slaves in a social system designed to create and perpetuate such power.

The Ottoman Empire grew out of one of several small Turkic beyliks or chiefdoms that existed in Anatolia beginning in the 11th Century. Under the leadership of Osman and his son Orhan, the Empire became the predominant regional power, supplanting the rapidly decaying Byzantine Empire. With this expansion came the need for a larger, more powerful military than a traditional semi-nomadic chiefdom could provide. Not only the size, but the composition of the army was an issue for Ottoman rulers. In the early days of the Empire, the military was composed of aristocrats who commanded their own troops, like most militaries of the time. Political systems featuring a monarchy and an armed aristocracy are typically unstable, and monarchs throughout history have sought to keep aristocracies in check. The Ottoman rulers sought a solution to this by looking to the long Muslim tradition of slave soldiers.

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\(^1\) The terms “slave” and “enslaved person” will be used interchangeably in this essay.
\(^2\) From “Yeni Cheri”, meaning “new soldiers” as the Janissaries were a new corps in the Ottoman army.
Muslim regimes from the earliest times after the founding of the religion in the seventh century used slaves in warfare, drawn from the great multitude of slaves they captured in the string of victories the early warriors of Islam enjoyed. However, under the Rashidun\(^3\) and Umayyad Caliphates\(^4\), this usually represented the conquerors taking advantage of militarily capable men who happened to fall into their hands as slaves rather than a systematic military slavery institution (Pipes 140-141), and in fact, under the Umayyads, the army was increasingly limited to free Syrian Arabs (Amitai 42).

It was under the Abbasid Caliphs Al-Ma’mum and especially Al-Mu’tasim\(^5\) that a system to acquire slaves for the military was established. This was due to the fact that the Abbasids did not achieve the wide conquests of their predecessors with the corresponding easy access to slaves, but also the increasing settlement of the Arab population that composed the armies of earlier periods into conquered towns and cities with the consequent cooling of their desire for war and conquest. Furthermore, the tribal and regional loyalties of Arab soldiers conflicted with Al-Mu’tasim’s desire to create a more centralized state (Amitai 43). The solution was to acquire slaves who would be under the control of and primarily loyal to the Caliph. Slaves from peripheral areas of their empire were preferred both because they were often non-Muslim and therefore easy to enslave within Islamic law and because any ties of loyalty to home and family were severed when they were enslaved and taken far away to the core areas of the empire, leaving them only their master and fellow slaves to focus on (inability to speak the language of the local population was also a factor). For similar reasons, youth was preferred: around eight to twelve years old, making them easier to mold in the person their masters desired. The slave

\(^3\) 632-661 AD  
\(^4\) 661-750 AD  
\(^5\) Brothers, these two Caliphs ruled in succession from 813-842 AD
would receive five to eight years of military training and other instruction before becoming a
full-time professional soldier for his master (Pipes 8-10). Al-Mu'tasim went so far as to build an
entirely new capital city from nothing in order to better isolate his slave-soldiers from the general
population in order to increase his control over them. (Amitai 47).

Al-Mu'tasim received loyal service from his military slaves, but his son Al-Wathiq had
trouble commanding the same respect and his successor Al-Mutawakkil was killed by a
conspiracy of military slaves. The Abbasid Caliphate survived, but the central authority Al-
Mu'tasim used his slave-soldiers to promote was broken and did not recover (Amitai 49-50).
Slave soldiers sometimes even took control of states away from their masters, whether working
behind the scenes and leaving the old leaders as figureheads or openly taking power for
themselves, which most famously occurred in Egypt in 1250, resulting in the Mamluk Sultanate.
These ironies are far from unique in the history of military slavery, and something the Ottomans
would suffer themselves. Despite this, military slavery following the Abbasid model was
frequently practiced by later states of the Middle East and the 14th-Century Muslim historian Ibn
Khaldun would speak highly of the practice:

“The status of slavery is indeed a blessing…[the slaves] embrace Islam with the
determination of true believers, while retaining their nomadic virtues which are
undefiled by vile nature, unmixed with the filth of lustful pleasures, unmarred by the
habits of civilization, with their youthful strength unshattered by the excess of luxury”
(Pipes 87)

The Ottoman path towards their own military slavery system much resembles the
development of military slavery in the Islamic world in the centuries before. The Janissaries
were first formed under Orhan⁷, but like the early Muslim military slaves they were prisoners

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⁶ “Mamluk” meaning “owned” or “purchased” and hence “slave”.
⁷ Reigned c. 1324-c. 1361
taken during war and moreover they functioned as a bodyguard for Orhan rather than as a normal military unit.

Orhan’s son Murad I\(^8\) reorganized the Janissaries into a larger force (though still numbering only about one thousand) and changed the method of recruitment; now the populations of newly-conquered territories would be combed by Ottoman authorities to locate strong and intelligent young boys who would be taken from their families, enslaved, and trained as Janissaries. Christians were usually exempted from military service under Muslim regimes in exchange for a special per capita tax, but the Ottomans decided to deny this to boys of a certain age to suit their purposes. It was in the reign of Murad II\(^9\) that the Janissary system came to full maturity. Its size was increased to seven thousand and more importantly, the method of recruitment changed again; as well as youths captured from newly conquered territory, a levy on Christian inhabitants already under Ottoman rule would be carried out (Kinross 87), perhaps to establish a steady stream of slave-soldiers not dependant on constant new conquests. This was called \textit{devşirme} and it was probably the most historically famous aspect of the Janissary system and the one that set it apart from earlier military slavery systems in the Islamic world.

As before, the authorities would inspect young boys among the Christian populace and select suitable candidates to be taken as slaves, but now rather than only occurring in newly conquered lands it became a regular occurrence; approximately every seven years, although it was more frequent in times of intense warfare and greater need for replacement soldiers. Only rural areas were subject to the levy; townsmen had economic skills too valuable to interfere with and moreover town life was believed to soften people and result in poor soldier material. Boys

\(^8\) Reigned c. 1360- c. 1389, the first Ottoman ruler to use the title of sultan.
\(^9\) Reigned 1421-1444 and 1446-1451
from the frequently war-torn Balkans were preferred, although other areas such as Anatolia were tapped later, to middling results (Goodwin 34-35).

Although recruitment as a Janissary could bring great wealth and power and almost certainly more than a rural peasant could ever hope to see, many families naturally dreaded their sons being enslaved by the Ottomans. The devşirme became infamous as the “blood tax” or “children’s levy” and supposedly, women were banned from witnessing the selection process, instead being left to weep at home. Ottoman laws about accurate baptismal records and absentee sons make it clear that there were attempts to evade the enslavement-draft. The recruiting officer who visited town to seek suitable candidates was referred to as the drover (that is, a horse dealer). The candidates would be stripped naked and inspected for physical and mental health (Goodwin 35). Duplicate lists of those selected were made to prevent the recruitment officer from committing fraud with the valuable property that the new slaves represented. The new recruits were guarded by soldiers during the journey east to the training sites and there is an account of recruits who tried to escape, only to be re-captured, beaten and dragged behind horses until other recruits would promise to guarantee their comrades would behave in the future (Goodwin 32). It is quite plain that the devşirme was a forced abduction into the slavery of the Janissary corps.

In the era of devşirme, the new slaves would be taken to the capital (Edirne, or Istanbul after 1453) where they would be stripped and inspected once again. Those who were deemed best, perhaps one to two hundred in a typical levy of five to six thousand, would be sent to the royal school inside the sultan’s palace where they would be educated into pages for the sultan and other government officials, positions which they themselves could hope to hold someday, giving rise to a slave bureaucracy that would become a hallmark of Ottoman government. The
remainder would be sent to a variety of other schools with most trained as infantrymen. All boys received new Muslim names and their fathers would be listed in the registers as “Abdullah” or some other name beginning with “abd” (meaning “slave of Allah”) to indicate their non-Muslim origin and hence their enslavement (Goodwin 37). The boys were converted to Islam and taught the Turkish language. After years of physical training, which might includes being hired out to work on a farm, and military instruction, the new Janissary would be assigned to a particular company and the company’s insignia tattooed onto his arm and leg (Goodwin 40).

A number of things made the Janissaries, as slaves, different from normal soldiers. They were forbidden to marry, own property (their arms, armor, and even the tents they slept in on campaign belonged to the sultan and were only distributed in time of need), or perform any other kind of labor. They lived in their barracks in times of peace and war, except when campaigning. Contrary to Islamic custom, they were forbidden to grow full beards; only mustaches were permitted. Symbolizing the Janissaries’ single-minded devotion to military activity was the insignia of their corps; a spoon and pot like the ones they used to eat their rations from while on campaign. Taking this association further, Janissary officers had titles like First Soup-Maker, First Cook or First Water-Carrier, and the regiment’s stewpot became the place where Janissaries would discuss matters among themselves, and later, rebellions were signaled by the overturning of the pots, indicating that the soldiers were no longer willing to take food from the sultan. Such humble terminology may have been intended to emphasize that the Janissaries were slaves of the sultan. Their lives were simple and harsh ones dominated by their function as soldiers, unlike free troops who could at least dream of carving out a small holding for their own wealth and power. Janissaries (in theory) had no power or wealth but what their sultan decided to bestow upon them, although he was generous with the latter; Janissaries received regular pay and at
higher rates than other infantry (Kinross 48-49). In times of peace, Janissaries served as firefighters and performed other labor for the capital such as bricklaying and repair of public structures like waterways (Goodwin 39).

The Janissary system in its mature form under Murad II certainly represented a form of slavery regardless of the fact that their experience was rather different from the more common kind of slave throughout history who performs some kind of manual labor for his or her master’s benefit; they received wages and education (making them unusual people in an uneducated, illiterate age), and depending on fortune and ability, a Janissary could end up as a very wealthy and powerful man. However, despite their chance to live more prosperous and prominent lives than most people, they were real slaves. Their recruitment was involuntary and forcible if necessary. Of primary importance is that the Ottomans deliberately recruited from a populace culturally foreign to the center of power: European Christians. The new recruits lacked any social connection to their surroundings, better allowing their captors/educators to mold them as they saw fit. Their new lives were determined entirely by the Ottoman authorities. They were given a new religion, a new name, and even a new father, “Abdullah”. The only thing that was preserved of their former lives was the fact that they were once non-Muslims, which only highlighted their enslaved status. They were not totally assimilated, however. They lived in their barracks full-time, away from the people of the city, and it was arranged for their appearance to set them apart; the prohibition of beards and the regimental tattoos on a Janissary’s arm and leg accomplished this. There is record of a sultan’s Grand Vizir, a product of the devşirme and therefore a slave, being humiliated by an Islamic jurist who informed him that his legal witness was inferior to that of a freeborn Muslim, the fact that he held the highest office beneath the sultan (and status immeasurably higher than a common Janissary) notwithstanding (Goodwin
26). In theory, the Janissaries only existed for the sultan’s purposes, hence the ban on marriage and the learning of trades which would confer something of their own to work for and the means to do so. They were paid well and were permitted to participate in looting while at war, but this was only if there were serving the sultan’s purpose by being his soldiers. With their former lives wiped out and existing only to further another’s goals without the ability to refuse, the Janissaries in their intended form definitely qualified as slaves.

For over a century, the Janissary corps appeared to have been an excellent idea. They gave the Ottoman sultans a highly disciplined standing army in an age when the Roman antecedent was in the distant past and no European state would match the feat for centuries. As enslaved outsiders, the Janissaries lack of natural socialization gave them a flexibility useful to soldiers; the corps quickly adopted firearms and became known for their skill in gunnery while the aristocratic cavalrmen refused to use guns because they felt them a cowardly way to kill an enemy and, incredibly, because the soot firearms produced ruined the fine clothes they were in the habit of wearing into battle (Goodwin 66). They also succeeded in providing the sultans with the reliable military power base any monarch craves. From this position of security, Mehmed II\(^\text{10}\) was able to eliminate the aristocratic families that could possibly pose a threat to the Ottomans’ control of the state and instead staffed the civil administration with slaves drawn from the \textit{devşirme} (Goodwin 58), creating a state which relied on slaves for war and administration. Janissaries were a significant part of the period of vigorous Ottoman conquests, playing an especially important role in the conquests of Constantinople, Hungary and Egypt, where they defeated those other famous slave-soldiers, the Mamluks.

\(^{10}\) Reigned 1444-1446 and 1451-1512
However, the ideal of the Janissary concept did not last for long, just as previous military slavery systems of the Islamic world tended to quickly cause trouble for the regimes that created them. The Janissaries became involved in politics as early as before the reign of Mehmed I\textsuperscript{11}, who required Janissary support among others to cement his claim on the throne against his brother. This was even before the Janissary system had even reached its mature form under Murad II, Mehmed’s son, and only about fifty years after the Janissaries in their original, limited form were created by Orhan. The Janissaries clearly knew that they held enough power to make their own desires known, regardless of the intentions of the sultans who created the system.

Reminiscent of the troubles the heirs of Al-Mu’tasim experienced, when devşirme-creator Murad II abdicated the throne in favor of his son Mehmed II, the Janissaries became resentful and demanded an increase in pay. When this was refused, they exploited their responsibility as firefighters to commit arson and allow the fires to burn, something for which they would become infamous as repeat offenders in the centuries to come (Kinross 90). After considerable chaos, the pay raise was granted, but the Janissaries’ dissatisfaction with Mehmed continued until his father was forced to come out of retirement and reign again until his death. During the beginning of Mehmed II’s second reign, the Janissaries revolted again and Mehmed reluctantly took advice to pay the entire corps a bonus to mark his accession, which became a perverse tradition that would haunt every subsequent sultan as long as the corps existed. Mehmed was so angry at having to take this measure he physically attacked one of the rebellious commanders and expelled him from the corps (Goodwin 113). The next sultan, Bayezid II\textsuperscript{12}, gained the throne with Janissary support won through promises of gifts despite his father’s preference for his other son, Jem

\textsuperscript{11} Reigned 1413-1421
\textsuperscript{12} Reigned 1481-1512
Bayezid’s own son, Selim I\(^{13}\), did much the same thing except that he struck while his father was still alive, forcing him to abdicate (Kinross 166). The next sultan, Suleiman I\(^{14}\), waged war successfully with the Janissaries but they became restless in peacetime and revolted so violently they are said to have burst into the presence of the sultan and threatened his life with their bows. Once again, they were appeased with money (Kinross 181).

This series of sultans’ terrible troubles with the Janissary corps all occurred within only a hundred years of the implementation of the *devşirme* system that represented the corps in its classic form but already the Janissary corps was not conforming to what a master would desire from his slaves. Moreover, this was during a period where virtually every sultan was vigorous and talented. The sultans who followed Suleiman I were generally incompetent and the Janissary corps’ straying from its intended form continued rapidly.

The essential feature of the Janissary system as a system of slavery was its control over the lives of those who became part of it. Before long however, that control began to weaken considerably. It was during the reign of Suleiman I, despite his capability, that active Janissaries were permitted to marry, very strongly weakening the system designed to focus Janissary loyalty onto the sultan (Kinross 285). The only restraint was that men who married and lived outside the barracks were excluded from promotion, but this only encouraged them to join outside trades to make up for those lost earning (Goodwin 88). Such forbidden non-military moneymaking was authorized in the reign of Ahmed I\(^{15}\). When they became traders, the Janissaries mixed more with the people of the city, losing the semi-isolation they were subject to when they lived in their barracks and trained frequently. Also during Ahmed’s reign, large-scale recruitment of Muslims

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\(^{13}\) Reigned 1512-1520

\(^{14}\) Reigned 1520-1566, remembered by his people as “The Lawgiver” and in the West as “The Magnificent”

\(^{15}\) Reigned 1603-1617
into the Janissaries occurred to make up for the manpower that less frequent levees could not supply. The combination of marriage, outside trade, and Muslim recruiting meant that Janissaries were often interested in enrolling their sons in the corps to enjoy the same privileges and opportunities they did in an organization that grew more and more lax. Selim II\textsuperscript{16} established a quota by which these Janissary sons could be admitted. Finally, Murad IV\textsuperscript{17} abolished the traditional restriction of recruitment to enslaved Christians all together, removing all barriers to nepotism (Kinross 285). The \textit{devşirme} itself was carried out for the last time in the reign of Ahmed III\textsuperscript{18} when like all things related to the Janissaries it did more harm than good (Goodwin 184). The corps was to outlive this defining institution of organized enslavement by more than one hundred years. What these changes all have in common is that they were only legitimizing what had in each case already been going on for a long time, demonstrating not only the Ottoman establishment’s lack of commitment to maintaining the Janissary’s slave institution, but also their inability to control them when they supposedly existed to be controlled.

In this slack climate, the Janissaries’ behavior became more and more outrageous. There were countless riots and incidents of arson. Many revolts resulted in the exile and/or execution of high government officials the Janissaries rightly or wrongly blamed their grievances on. They became progressively less useful in battle; once renowned as “swift of foot and sharp of eye”, the phrase was now derisively taken to mean that they would watch for the first moment the battle turned against them and then run away (Kinross 292). Despite this, they stubbornly refused reform out of a sense of inflated pride, in contrast to their predecessors’ wise early adoption of the firearm. That they were able to do so at all speaks to how little control was maintained over

\textsuperscript{16} Reigned 1566-1574
\textsuperscript{17} Reigned 1623-1640
\textsuperscript{18} Reigned 1703-1730
men who were called slaves. The tattoos used to mark a Janissary as one of the sultan’s slave soldiers became a tool for boasting, as described by a French diplomat around the time the corps was abolished; “These distinctive marks were in general use among the Janissaries. When they wished to inspire more respect, they used to reveal them nonchalantly by pulling up their sleeves and puffing hard and gravely.”(Reed 256)

The Janissaries became a consistent threat to the men who were called their masters. Osman II\(^9\) became enraged that he was “subject to his own slaves” and hatched a scheme to replace them with a new army. Despite an attempt at secrecy, this plot was discovered and a serious revolt broke out. For the first and only time, the revolting Janissaries not only deposed the sultan, but killed him as well. This represented the absolute nadir of the master/slave relationship between the sultan and the Janissaries. While the Janissaries were never again directly involved with the murder of another sultan, they did depose Mustafa II\(^20\) over pay, and Ahmed III and Selim III\(^21\) over attempts to reform the corps. Occasionally, a strong minster or sultan would cow the Janissaries, but a lack of consistency prevented real changes from being made.

Selim III’s reign was an important prelude to the Janissaries’ destruction. He organized a new corps of soldiers called the *Nezam i-Cedit*\(^22\) trained on European models to counteract the military backwardness the previously innovative Empire had fallen into. These new soldiers scored some successes where the Janissaries failed badly, but the new corps was abolished after the Janissary revolt, and many were killed by the angry members of the older corps (Goodwin

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\(^9\) Reigned 1618-1622  
\(^20\) Reigned 1695-1703  
\(^21\) Reigned 1789-1807  
\(^22\) “New Order”
Selim failed because he lacked sufficient support from the ruling elite to oppose the Janissaries and because he had moved too openly against their interests, showing what a precarious position the supposed master of the Janissaries now occupied. After being deposed, Selim devoted his time to educating his nephew, the future sultan Mahmud II, who would finally destroy the Janissary corps (Reed 6).

When Mahmud became sultan in 1808, he eagerly tried to continue the reform work of the uncle he admired so much, but like Selim, he faced revolt and only escaped Selim’s fate by having the only other claimant to the throne murdered. The only vestige of loyalty left in the Janissaries was a respect for the Ottoman bloodline, if not any individual sultan, though perhaps this was only because their privileges and pay still flowed from the sultanate. By rendering himself the only living male of the Ottoman family, Mahmud protected his throne, but was obliged to give up his reforms (Reed 2). It wasn’t until 1822 that Mahmud was able to make a new attempt at change. He moved slowly, making preparations for four years, promoting or persuading civil and military officials to create a group who were personally loyal to him and would support him in reform efforts, an ironic requirement to move against so-called slaves who were intended to exhibit exactly such loyalty.

In 1826, he was ready to move and announced the formation of the eshkenji corps, claiming that it would be modeled on Egyptian lines, which was a dissimulation to parry the xenophobia of the Janissaries and conservative religious scholars as the Egyptian army had in turn modeled itself on Western armies (Reed 121). The new corps was an attempt to co-opt and

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23 Reigned 1808-1839, known as “The Reformer”
24 A then-archaic word with Janissary associations meaning fighting soldiers, rather than those on garrison duty
reform the Janissaries rather than outright replace them, but there was still tremendous tension felt over the proposals, as a French student/interpreter wrote;

The words Nezam i-Cedit were hated. Sultan Mahmud is said to have used them at a meeting…to discuss reform, and word of this spread. No one believed it at first because they never imagined that Mahmud II, enlightened by the deplorable fate of Selim III, would have the temerity to expose himself to the hate of the Janissaries. (Reed 176-177)

This demonstrates how lopsided the balance of power had become; the master was thought to be foolish to risk angering his slaves, and with good reason; only three weeks after reforms were announced, the Janissaries began plotting a revolt. They overturned their stewpots in their traditional sign of rebellion and tried to locate the Grand Vizir, probably to kill him. They failed and were pushed back to their barracks by troops loyal to the sultan. The Janissaries appealed to the other soldiers and the common populace for support, but Mahmud’s preparations paid off and the soldiers remained loyal. The common people withheld support and even joined the sultan’s army out of vengeful frustration with the Janissaries’ lawless behavior. When the Janissaries refused to surrender, the sultan’s troops opened fire with heavy cannon, setting the barracks on fire, killing many. No effective resistance to the sultan’s troops was offered; a rather pathetic end for a group once so feared and respected as soldiers. In the weeks afterwards, thousands of Janissaries were tried for treason and immediately executed. Only one day after the fighting, Mahmud made the decision to abolish the Janissary corps (Reed 196-232).

The Janissary concept served the purposes of the Ottoman sultans; to give them loyal and effective soldiers personally loyal to them through the bonds of slavery. Much like the historical antecedents in the wider Islamic world, the Ottomans draw their soldiers from the young boys of a culturally foreign non-Muslim population that was plentiful and easy to enslave under Islamic law. The Janissary institution, by giving the recruits a new name, new language, new religion,
and new culture, deliberately negated much of who the enslaved individual was to remake them for the Ottoman state’s purposes. The stringent restrictions on where and how Janissaries lived similarly existed to control their lives to the sultan’s benefit, marking the Janissary corps as a slave system. However, much like their historical predecessors, the Janissaries quickly chafed against the rigidity of their slavery and by the sheer capability for violence they possessed as soldiers, agitated for relaxations of discipline and greater privileges.

It is difficult to determine when exactly the Janissary system ceased to represent a form of slavery. The Janissaries kept the name of “slave” to their end, and the distinguishing features of the institution were weakened and lost in a gradual process. However, when Christians were no longer forcibly recruited, and freeborn Muslims could join the corps in their fathers’ places and marry and conduct trade as they pleased and the only remaining feature of the classic Janissary corps was loyalty to a dynasty they depended upon for their power even as they abused it, it is safe to say they were no longer truly slaves. Their final destruction demonstrates this; Mahmud II had to make careful preparations before he dared to propose reforms that would not even threaten the Janissaries, but only create a new system alongside them. It was only the Janissaries own narrow-minded brutishness that allowed Mahmud to destroy them when they rebelled, and this destruction was a military victory of superior arms, tactics, and preparation. When the Janissaries rebelled and threatened the sultan for whatever reason throughout their history, they succeeded for the same reason. Their supposed servility did not come into the question at all.
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